SPORT

Irfan to lead Pakistan Shaheens in Asia Cup Rising Stars

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: Mohammad Irfan Khan will lead Pakistan Shaheens for the upcoming Asia Cup Rising Stars — an eight-team tournament to be played in Qatar from Nov 14 to 23 — the country's cricket board announced on Friday.

The event, previously known as the Emerging Teams Asia Cup, has been rebranded from this year's edition.

Shaheens are placed in Group 'B' alongside Oman, India 'A' and the UAE. Group 'A' comprises Afghanistan 'A', Bangladesh 'A', Hong Kong and Sri Lanka 'A'.

The Shaheens will open their campaign against Oman on Friday (Nov 14), followed by fixtures against India 'A' on Sunday (Nov 16) and the UAE on Tuesday (Nov 18). All matches will be staged at the West End Park International Cricket Stadium, Doha.

Under the tournament format, the top two sides from each group will progress to the semi-finals, scheduled for Nov 21. The final will take place on Sunday (Nov 23).

Before their departure for Qatar on Nov 12, the Shaheens will hold a training camp from Nov 8 to 11 at the Hanif Mohammad High Performance Centre in Karachi.

Squad:Mohammad Irfan Khan (captain), Ahmed Daniyal, Arafat Minhas, Maaz Sadaqat, Mohammad Faiq, Muhammad Ghazi Ghori, Mohammad Naeem, Mohammad Salman, Mohammad Shahzad, Mubasir Khan, Saad Masood, Shahid Aziz, Sufiyan Moqim, Ubaid Shah, Yasir Khan.

Mikael to face Hamza in ITF Jr final

By Our Sports Reporter

ISLAMABAD: The national players enjoyed a successful day at the ITF Pakistan World Junior Tennis Championship J-60 on Friday, with Mikaeel Ali Baig and Hamza Roman advancing to the boys' singles final here at the PTF-SDA Tennis Complex.

In the semi-finals, Mikael defeated Turkey's Emre Atlamis 6-3, 7-5. Hamza secured his place in the final with a 6-4, 6-2 victory over compatriot Abubakar Talha.

The local players also found success in the doubles semi-finals.

The pair of Mikael and Lithuania's Kristijonas Milasauskas overcame Pakistan's Abdul Basit and M. Haziq Aasim 2-6, 6-2, 10-3.

Another Pakistani duo, Hamza and Talha, defeated the team of Turkey's Emre Atlamis and Nicolas Moravec of the Czech Republic 6-7(3/7), 6-1, 10-6.

In the girls' singles semi-finals, Haniya Aman Minhas from Saudi Arabia beat Turkey's Denzi Cakil 6-0, 7-5. She will face Russia's Varvara Rubtsova in the final, who defeated Kazakhstan's Karolina Ligai 6-2, 7-6(4).

BIRMINGHAM: Aston Villa's Ian Maatsen shoots to score past Maccabi Tel Aviv goalkeeper Roi Mishpati during their Europa League match at Villa Park.—Reuters

Villa cruise to win over Maccabi as Forest fail to break Sturm Graz

BIRMINGHAM: Aston Villa had little trouble securing a 2-0 home win against Maccabi Tel-Aviv thanks to goals from Ian Maatsen and Donyell Malen, while Nottingham Forest were held to a 0-0 draw at Sturm Graz, where Morgan Gibbs-White saw a first-half penalty saved.

Maatsen gave Villa the lead in first-half stoppage time, steering the ball in from a tight angle. Malen then sealed the result from the penalty spot a minute before the hour mark after Elad Madmon had fouled Ezri Konsa.

"(It was a) good evening," Villa manager Unai Emery told TNT Sports. "Focus and respecting the competition and the teams. We were playing solidly and playing seriously."

Some 700 police were positioned around the stadium as pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel protesters held separate demonstrations outside Villa Park in the run-up to kick-off.

The protests passed largely peacefully, with police saying they made six arrests for offences ranging from racial aggravation to failing to comply with a dispersal order.

Villa announced last month that no Maccabi fans would be allowed at the match following a police risk assessment.

The decision sparked criticism, including from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer who set about trying to reverse the move, but the Israeli club later announced it would decline tickets for its fans anyway, citing safety concerns.

On Thursday, some 200 pro-Palestinian demonstrators gathered at one side of the stadium, chanting "Free Palestine" and displaying banners calling for a boycott of Israel and its exclusion from international football.

A few dozen pro-Israel protesters stood at the other side waving Israeli flags and holding posters that read "Keep anti-Semitism out of football".

In Austria, Sturm's Maurice Malone briefly lifted the home crowd just before the half-hour mark when he found the net, but the effort was ruled out for offside.

Forest had the chance to break the deadlock from the penalty spot in the 33rd minute after Emanuel Aiwu handled a cross in the box, but Gibbs-White's effort was saved as Sturm goalkeeper Oliver Christensen went the right way.

The second half produced little in the way of chances, and the score remained unchanged at the final whistle.

In Denmark, Celtic suffered a humbling 3-1 defeat by Midtjylland, who struck three times in the space of eight first-half minutes to take control of the match.

Celtic scored a consolation when Reo Hatate converted from the penalty spot in the 81st minute.

The Danish side have four wins from four in the Europa League and top the standings on 12 points. Celtic have four points and are outside the playoff places.

Meanwhile it proved to be a bad day for French teams as all three Ligue 1 sides — Nice, Lille and Olympique Lyonnais — lost their fixtures on Thursday.

Nice took the lead at home against Freiburg through Kevin Carlos in the 25th minute.

However, Johan Manzambi equalised four minutes later, before Vincenzo Grifo, from the penalty spot, and Derry Scherhant secured a comfortable 3-1 victory for the German side.

Red Star Belgrade edged Lille 1-0 at home. Austrian forward Marko Arnautovic was the hero for the Serbian side as he scored from the penalty spot five minutes from time after Berke Ozer had fouled Mirko Ivanic.

Real Betis controlled the match at home against Lyon and secured a 2-0 victory with first-half goals from Abde Ezzalzouli and Antony.

In Scotland, Rangers' difficult campaign continued with a 2-0 defeat by AS Roma, who struck in the first half through Matias Soule and Lorenzo Pellegrini. The Scottish side and Nice are the only teams yet to register a point after four rounds. Gian Piero Gasperini's Roma moved up to 18th.

Elsewhere, despite being reduced to 10 men after Charalampos Lykogiannis was sent off in the 23rd minute, Bologna drew 0-0 at home to Norwegian side SK Brann.

Celta Vigo won 3-0 away to Dinamo Zagreb, while FC Porto drew 1-1 at 10-man Utrecht of the Netherlands.

Belgium's Genk edged a seven-goal thriller at Braga 4-3 and two late strikes by Bilal El Khannouss and Deniz Undav handed VfB Stuttgart a 2-0 victory over Feyenoord.

PALACE SEE OFF AZ ALKMAAR

In the UEFA Conference League on Thursday, Crystal Palace returned to winning ways with a 3-1 win in London over AZ Alkmaar.

Following a shock defeat at Selhurst Park last time out against AEK Larnaca of Cyprus, Palace earned their first-ever home win in the main stage of a European competition by beating AZ.

A Maxence Lacroix goal followed up by an Ismaila Sarr brace secured that win for Oliver Glasner's Eagles as they moved to six points after three league phase outings.

France international Jean-Philippe Mateta missed a 17th-minute penalty for Palace as it looked as if their home hoodoo in Europe might continue.

However, they soon went ahead on 22 minutes as defender Lacroix fired home a sharp finish from a knockdown, before Senegalese forward Sarr prodded home from close range on the stroke of half-time.

A deflected Sven Mijnans strike in the 54th minute gave the visitors hope but Sarr then wrapped up the victory three minutes later with a neat one-on-one finish.

Meanwhile, Mainz came from behind to win 2-1 at home to Fiorentina thanks to a 95th-minute goal by Lee Jae-sung.

The two-time Conference League runners-up took the lead inside 20 minutes courtesy of Simon Sohm, before Mainz hit back through Benedict Hollerbach.

As the match seemed to be set for a stalemate, Lee glanced home to grab a third win in three league phase outings for the Germans.

Mainz are joined by two other teams, Turkey's Samsunspor and Slovenians Celje, in still holding an unblemished record in the tournament this campaign.

The Turkish Super Lig outfit beat Hamrun Spartans of Malta 3-0, while Celje scored two goals in five second-half minutes to defeat Legia Warsaw 2-1.

Elsewhere, Aberdeen played out a goalless draw with AEK Larnaca and Shakhtar Donetsk beat Iceland's Breidablik 2-0 in the Polish city of Krakow.

Dynamo Kyiv had six different goalscorers as they thumped Bosnians Zrinjski 6-0 in Lublin, Poland.

Spain's Rayo Vallecano edged Lech Poznan 3-2 at home, while Ligue 1 club Strasbourg moved to seven points with a 2-1 victory in Sweden against Hacken. —Agencies

Djokovic sweeps into Athens final

PARIS: Novak Djokovic dropped serve for only the second time in the competition but still cruised into the final of the ATP event in Athens with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over Yannick Hanfmann on Friday.

The 38-year-old Serb took 79 minutes to dispatch the German qualifier.

"I think it was the best tennis I've played this tournament," Djokovic added. "It came at the right time. Hanfmann poses a great threat because he serves big, has a big game, so I needed to really stay focused."

Djokovic — who defeated Nuno Borges 7-6(7/1), 6-4 in the quarter-finals on Thursday — broke his four-match semi-final losing streak. He had fallen in the last four at Roland Garros, Wimbledon, the US Open and Shanghai.

His last semi-final victory was at the Geneva clay-court event in May when he went on to beat Hubert Hurkacz in the final for his 100th career singles title. The only men with more are Roger Federer (103 titles) and Jimmy Connors (109).

After missing an early opportunity to break the German qualifier at 2-1 in the first set, Djokovic broke at 3-2 and won the set 6-3.

In the second set, Djokovic dropped serve at 2-1, but immediately responded to level the score at 3-3. Djokovic broke Hanfmann again in the next game and held serve to win before a noisy, supportive crowd at the event which this year took the place of the short-lived Belgrade Open on the ATP schedule.

On Thursday, Lorenzo Musetti posted a 6-2, 6-4 win over Alexandre Muller to reach the semi-finals and maintain his hopes of qualifying for the season-ending ATP Finals.—AFP

Islamabad crush Multan for first Quaid Trophy win

LAHORE: Islamabad secured their first victory of the ongoing Quaid-i-Azam Trophy season with a comprehensive 10-wicket win over Multan on the third day of the sixth-round fixture at the Imran Khan Cricket Stadium here on Friday.

After gaining a commanding 163-run first-innings lead, Islamabad enforced the follow-on and dismissed Multan for 172 in their second innings. Shayan Sheikh led the attack with figures of 4-56, while pacer Hunain Shah continued his impressive form by claiming 3-25.

Needing just 10 runs for victory, Islamabad reached the target within the first over to wrap up the match before lunch.

Hunain, who returned match figures of six for 81 and contributed a vital 51 in the first innings, was named player of the match.

At the Shoaib Akhtar Cricket Stadium in Islamabad, Fata remained in control of their contest against Abbottabad after amassing a mammoth 687 for seven declared on Thursday. On day three, left-arm spinner Asif Afridi kept Abbottabad in check with a seven-wicket haul (7-127).

Abbottabad finished the day at 424 for eight, with opener Shahzaib Khan producing a defiant 167 off 350 balls, including 20 fours and two sixes. Skipper Khalid Usman was unbeaten on 50 at the close.

At the Abbottabad Cricket Stadium, Sialkot responded strongly to Bahawalpur's imposing first-innings total of 511 for nine declared — built on centuries by Mohammad Ammar (166), Saad Khan (155) and Mohammad Sudais (112).

Openers Mohammad Huraira and Azan Awais dominated day three, stitching together a massive 326-run partnership. Huraira struck a blistering 178 off 216 balls with 24 fours and three sixes, while Azan was unbeaten on 156 off 241 balls, hitting 18 fours and a six as Sialkot reached 375 for one at stumps.

Karachi Blues tightened their grip over Peshawar at the Marghzar Cricket Ground.

After dismissing Peshawar for 165 on Thursday — courtesy of pacer Mohammad Umar's six for 30 — Karachi extended their lead through centuries from Saad Baig and Shan Masood.

Baig, who scored 109 in the first innings, followed up with 116 off 153 balls (12 fours and three sixes), while Shan remained unbeaten on 101, hitting seven fours and two sixes. Karachi declared at 283 for three in their second innings.

Peshawar were struggling at 92 for four at stumps, still needing 418 runs for victory, with Mohammad Hamza taking all four wickets for 40 runs.—Agencies

Pakistan to face Bangladesh for hockey World Cup qualifier spot

By our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: Pakistan named an 18-member hockey squad on Friday for a three-match series in Dhaka against Bangladesh, a contest that will determine a spot in the World Cup qualifiers.

The series was initiated by the International Hockey Federation (FIH) after Pakistan could not travel to India for the Asia Cup in August-September due to strained political relations between the two neighbouring countries.

Under the FIH system, Pakistan was given the opportunity to play the three-match series against the team that finished sixth in the Asia Cup.

Bangladesh secured that sixth position, prompting Pakistan's travel to Dhaka which begins on Saturday.

Head coach Olympian Tahir Zaman said the Bangladesh team is a "good competitive side" and that Pakistan will not take it easy. He added that the team is ready to meet the challenge to qualify for the World Cup qualifiers.

Squad:

Ammad Shakeel Butt (captain), Abdullah Ishtiaq Khan, Muneeb-ur-Rehman, Mohammad Sufyan, Mohammad Abdullah, Hammad-ud-Din, Abdul Manan, Moeen Shakeel, Zakraya Hayat, Arshad Liaqat, Ghazanfar Ali, Rana Abdul Waheed, Afraz, Abdul Hanan Shahid, Abdul Rahman, Rana Mohammad Walid, Ahmad Nadeem and Junaid Manzoor.

Alex fastest in practice ahead of Portuguese MotoGP

PORTIMAO: Alex Marquez posted the fastest time on his Ducati-Gresini in Friday's qualifying practice for the Portuguese MotoGP which was disrupted by light rain.

The Spaniard, already assured of finishing second in the championship this season, was 0.030 seconds faster than Italy's former double world champion Francesco Bagnaia of Ducati.

KTM's Pedro Acosta finished thirdwith Marco Bezzecchi of Aprilia fourth.

In the riders' championship, only five points separate Italy's Bezzecchi, third overall, from his compatriot Bagnaia, in fourth — with as many as 37 points up for grabs on Saturday now and Sunday.

With two rounds remaining this season, Acosta is still in contention for a final podium finish — but he trails by 31 points.

Injured Spaniard Marc Marquez, already assured of the title in the premier category, and his compatriot, 2024 world champion Jorge Martin of Aprilia, did not make the trip to Portugal. —AFP

JESSICA Pegula of the US stretches for a return during the WTA Finals match against Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina at the King Saud University Indoor Arena on Friday.—Reuters

Rybakina topples Pegula to book place in WTA Finals title clash

RIYADH: Elena Rybakina came from a set down to dismantle Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-4, 6-3 on Friday and make the WTA Finals title clash, where the Kazakh will face either Aryna Sabalenka or Amanda Anisimova for a shot at her first season-ending crown.

World number one Sabalenka meets American Anisimova next at the King Saud University Sports Arena in a rematch of their U.S. Open final in September, which the Belarusian won in straight sets to claim her fourth Grand Slam trophy.

Pegula dialled up the intensity after an early exchange of breaks in the opening set, as the 2023 runner-up eased to a 4-2 lead when Rybakina appeared to struggle with accuracy due to a shoulder issue sustained during her warm-up a day earlier.

The 31-year-old promptly closed out the first set thanks to Rybakina's 25th unforced error, but there was a sudden shift in momentum in the next set as she found herself 1-4 behind and in danger of being dragged the distance.

Pegula recovered her rhythm and pushed hard in her bid to draw level in the set, but Rybakina responded fiercely in the 10th game to force a decider, where the pair swapped breaks again in a tight battle.

A forehand into the net from Pegula at the end of the eighth game handed the advantage back to Rybakina, who remained calm to hold in the next game and secure the victory and remain unbeaten in the season finale.

"It was such a tough match, not easy to come back but I'm glad I found my way," Rybakina said after the match. "We had some really tough rallies, I'm really happy I managed to push myself a bit more and win it."

Rybakina also thanked the crowd as she recorded her fourth win from four this week and reached her first ever WTA Finals.—Reuters